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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 006165

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAQI OUT-OF-COUNTRY VOTING, PROSPECTS FOR
DIPLOMATIC TIES, AND VISAS FOR SYRIANS

REF: 04 DAMASCUS 0467

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

1. (C) Summary: The head of the Iraqi Interests Section in Damascus Sabah al-Imam told PolChief November 27 that an Iraqi official from Baghdad has arrived and is coordinating with SARG officials to organize Out-of-Country voting for December 13-15 at ten Damascus polling stations. Imam expressed guarded hope that the SARG might move to re-establish diplomatic ties with Iraq after the voting. The consular division of the Interests Section issues fewer than 200 visas monthly to Syrians to travel to Iraq, most of them for Syrian men married to Iraqi women. End Summary.

2. (C) OUT-OF-COUNTRY VOTING FOR IRAQIS IN SYRIA: The head of the Iraqi Interests Section in Damascus, Sabah al-Imam, reported November 27 that planning for Iraqi out-of-country voting in Syria is proceeding smoothly. In mid-November, Imam signed an MOU with a SARG MFA official, Feisal Hamwi, the head of International Organizations, detailing plans for the joint effort. Imam said that the International Office of Migration would not be involved in OCV for these elections. Baghdad has sent a representative, Sa'ad al-Samarai, to take the lead. He has opened an office in the Damascus suburb of Mezzeh. Samarai met on November 24 with his MFA counterpart and officials from other SARG ministries, including the Ministry of Interior. Another meeting is scheduled for November 28.

3. (C) The voting is scheduled for December 13-15 at ten Syrian polling stations, all of them located in Damascus. (In the previous OCV, all polling stations were likewise located in Damascus.) Imam expects some 30,000 Iraqis to vote in the elections, a number he described as "more than double" the number who voted this past January. The successful first OCV one year ago, with little or no evidence that SARG authorities had used intelligence gathered from participation in the voting to harass or deport Iraqis living and working here illegally, had led Iraqis to feel more at ease about voting in the upcoming election, Imam said.

4. (C) NO PROGRESS ON RESUMING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: On future diplomatic relations, Imam said there had been no significant developments, while expressing hope that the Syrians might move on this issue after the elections in Iraq. He noted that after being summoned by DFM Walid Mu'allim several days ago to receive a letter from President Bashar al-Asad for Iraqi President Jamal Talabani, detailing Syrian efforts to cooperate with the UNIIIC investigation, he had raised the issue of diplomatic relations. (Note: He was following up on an Iraqi MFA recommendation that he sound out the SARG MFA, in the wake of Asad's reference in his November 10 speech, about the possibility of re-establishing relations.)

5. (C) Mu'allim told Imam that the SARG did not want to resume diplomatic relations at the present time because it would appear that the government had succumbed to foreign pressure. Instead, the SARG wanted to take such action during a visit to Syria by PM Ja'afari, where it would seem like a more natural development. Imam reported that the Iraqi MFA Undersecretary for Administrative and Technical Affairs, Sa'ad al-Hayani, visited Damascus a few months ago in a move designed to fast-track the resumption of relations, but had been similarly brushed aside by Mu'allim. Imam speculated that the Syrians want to proceed first on commercial issues and on other fronts with the Iraqis, and then on the issue of formal resumption of ties. Imam said that he had recommended to his government that Iraq refuse such movement until the Syrians moved to re-establish ties.

6. (C) LESS THAN 200 IRAQI VISAS MONTHLY FOR SYRIANS: Imam's consular section only issues visas to Syrians to visit Iraq in two circumstances: to Syrian male citizens who are married to Iraqis, as well as to Syrian businessmen. In both cases, the applicants must prove their bona fides with documentation. For businessmen, that means a letter from the Syrian Chamber of Commerce and another from the MFA.

7. (C) In the month of October, the Iraqi Interest Section issued 181 visas to Syrians, 15 to businessmen and the rest to Syrian husbands of Iraqi women, reported Imam. He added

that he was not sure of the exact screening procedures at the border, but knew that Iraqi immigration officials, whether at the border or at Baghdad International Airport, verified that entering Syrians had a proper visa.

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